

Books of The Times

By Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

CONSPIRACY. By Anthony Summers. 640 pages. Illustrated. McGraw-Hill. \$17.95.

THERE have been so many books written about the assassination of President Kennedy — and among them so many of dubious merit and provenance — that the mind tends to freeze over at the prospect of yet another one. So what exactly is it about Anthony Summers's "Conspiracy" — an exhaustive review of what the author calls "the crime — and the controversy — of the century," by a British investigative reporter with many years of experience working with the British Broadcasting Corporation — that makes it seem so relatively fresh and important?

Most obviously, it's the changed atmosphere of American life in which it is published. We have come so far down the road of disillusionment since 1963 — what with Vietnam, Watergate and other political murders — that fantasies of conspiracy we scoffed at 15 years ago no longer seem nearly so implausible. So it is now with almost a shrug that we arrive at Mr. Summers's conclusion that while Lee Harvey Oswald had something to do with President Kennedy's assassination (he may even have fired three shots from the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository), he was somehow part of a conspiracy involving anti-Castro

Cuban exiles, members of the Mafia and what Mr. Summers calls "a renegade element in U.S. intelligence" services.

A New Sense Evoked

Almost as obvious an explanation for the distinctiveness of "Conspiracy" is the fact that it is the first major book to appear since the House Select Committee on Assassinations delivered its final report in 1979. Also, it's the first book to take cognizance of the committee's astonishing conclusions, based on an acoustics expert's analysis of a tape recording made at the scene of the assassination, that four bullets, not three, were fired during the 8.31 seconds that gunshots were heard in Dealey Plaza in Dallas that day; therefore there had to be more than one gunman involved; and therefore President Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy."

Then there is the sense of summary that Mr. Summers's book inspires — the feeling it arouses that if over the years we've been lulled to sleep by the obsessiveness and obscureness of certain conspiracy theorists, here is the perfect opportunity to wake up and be refreshed. For not only is "Conspiracy" an exhaustive assessment of every cranky supposition and mystifying piece of evidence from the "two-Oswald theory" to the so-called "magic

bullet," it also represents a wealth of fresh investigation, including interviews by Mr. Summers with witnesses who have never been formally talked to before.

Finally, this book seems worthwhile simply because it is skillfully and compellingly written. Indeed, it is so dramatically constructed that not even the author's attraction to blind alleys serves to put us off. Even where Mr. Summers pauses to introduce speculations he can't satisfactorily resolve — such as the possibility that Oswald fired no shots at all, or that he was seen in the company of a United States Intelligence case officer only weeks before the assassination — we rush on through his narrative as if we were reading an artful thriller.

'Coincidences' Cited

Of course "Conspiracy" offers no firm conclusions. It doesn't begin to attempt an explanation of the technique of "expert" acoustics analysis; it expresses instead an almost ritual obelance to the authority of the word "scientific." It doesn't suggest the identity of any other figure who might have pulled a trigger on Nov. 22, 1963. And in the process of chasing down the many obscure but disturbing coincidences that have surrounded this case, it falls down a hole leading to the most elaborate set of coincidences of all. But once you accept the notion that Oswald was "set up," you have to explain how his manipulators happened to pick "a patsy" who happened to get a job in a building past which the President's motorcade happened to proceed at a time that happened to be ideal. And this



Anthony Summers

Mr. Summers has not even begun to do.

Still, "Conspiracy" serves to dramatize, as no previous book has done, the superficiality of the Warren Commission's investigation and report. It reveals the appalling degree to which the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the various branches of Military Intelligence have failed to cooperate with the official investigations. And if it discourages any expectation that the complete truth behind the assassination in Dallas will some day be known, it gives us reason to hope that eventually we will know a little more than we understand today.